David Brown on revelation: a small introductory working note

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This note was one of several working papers I wrote in seeking to formulate my PhD topic. I did not go ahead with it, but it still interests me greatly

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David Brown[1] is interested in theology's relationship with the arts and culture more generally. That interest is reflected in five books published by Oxford University Press. In the first two, *Tradition and Imagination* (1999) and *Discipleship and Imagination* (2000), Brown explores the way in which the Christian understanding of biblical revelation has been affected by changes in the wider culture and in turn has affected it.

At outset of *Tradition and Imagination*, Brown explains that his aim

> is to show that tradition, so far from being something secondary or reactionary, is the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond. Indeed, so much is this so that Christians must disabuse themselves of the habit of contrasting biblical revelation and later tradition, and instead see the hand of God in a continuing process that encompasses both.[2]

Brown seeks, "not to disparage Scripture, but rather to extricate it from a burden which in [his] view it cannot possibly bear."[3]

> The incarnation reveals a God who took with maximum seriousness the limitations of a specific cultural context, and so we only do that revelation a disservice if we posit as always present in Scripture the viewpoints now taken by the contemporary Church. Instead, we need to hear how the story develops, and thus of a *God continuously involved in the history of the community of faith*.[4]

Brown does not disqualify critical work to discern the intended original context and intention of the Biblical text, but adds that, "present-day Christianity … will go badly wrong, if it attempts an unmediated dialogue with the biblical text rather than recognizing also the intervening history that has helped shape its present perception of the text's meaning."[5]

Brown's thesis is that tradition is a living process, constantly bringing forth new insights into the inherited belief system. He argues that this process occurs largely by the imagination, creating new images and perhaps new concepts that enrich our understanding of what has been handed down from the past for "the usual sharp contrast made between

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1. Emeritus Professor David William Brown, FBA FRSE (1948 -).
2. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.,* emphasis added.
5. *Ibid.,* 2.

revelation and tradition is no longer sustainable."[6] Brown defends the creative element involved in discerning revelation in scripture and contends that the human element limits what God can get the individual to see about Godself in the text of scripture. Revelation is not so much discovered as declared by inspired readers under the guidance of God. Brown speaks of,

> the continuous adaptation of God's revelation to the world under new circumstances and conditions. The process was a messy one since it entailed God's deep involvement with people like ourselves, and so a fallible Bible and a fallible Church interacting with a no less fallible wider world. … But discipleship, if it is about anything, is surely not so much about instantaneous results as about a continuing process of transformation, as both as individuals and as a community we gradually learn more deeply of God's meaning and purpose for our lives.[7]

For Brown, our not accepting the fallible and messy character of scripture means that "Christianity is now progressively entering into a world of self-deception where it must inevitably seem less and less plausible in the modern world."[8]

> If we turn to revealed theology, my main worry here is the inadequacy of present understandings to deal with the way in which all human expression is embodied within, and limited by, particular cultural contexts. It would of course have been much easier for theologians if the Bible had been exempt from the normal conditioning pattern that characterizes the rest of human thought, but, the more deeply one studies the history of biblical interpretation, the more I think one sees that pattern to apply here also, with the interpretative grid employed at the time inevitably also affected by the wider culture in which it is set.[9]

As Brown sees it, our reasoning and values are failing to respond to why people actually believe and come to faith. He declares that "both natural and revealed theology are in crisis, and that the only way out is to give proper attention to the cultural embeddedness of both."[10] Human culture in its many forms, once central to Christian theology, has become peripheral, and theology is thus impoverished. Asked in an interview how church leaders might apply what he is saying in their communities, Brown replied:

> Rather than thinking that people in the secular world are experiencing moments of transcendence, or encounters with God, the church is rather reluctant to endorse it because it's not fully orthodox. Rather than being negative about those experiences of God, we should be saying, "let's pick up on that." Which is why, in terms of music, talking with a person about what music they like and so on can make a point of contact. Or, the gardener talking to people about gardening can make a connection. There are lots of opportunities

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6. David Brown, "Did Revelation Cease?" in *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne,* ed. Alan Padgett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 121-142.
7. David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 405-6.
8. David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience Through Metaphor and Drama*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 272-3.
9. David Brown, "Response: Experience, Symbol, and and Revelation: Continuing the Conversation," in MacSwain and Worley, *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture,* 268.
10. Brown, *God and Mystery in Words*, 269.

to bring people into the Christian story, but the trouble is we tend to want to do it very directly and say "believe or don't believe." The extreme version, of course, is where you have to subscribe to a long list of things.[11]

Here, then is Brown's motivation—to bring people, through their shared culture, into the Christian story. He is motivated by, "the need to avoid so privileging the period of the biblical canon that it seems so dramatically out of step with the rest of God's action (or inaction) in history as to render the very claim itself incredible."[12] Brown asserts that the very incarnation of Christ itself has changed through history as has our understanding of it.

> So far from the incarnation remaining beyond all cultural change, even the understanding of this central Christian doctrine has in fact changed hugely over the course of Christian history … Yet from none of this would I want to call into question either [Jesus'] perfection or his divinity. The glory of revelation is precisely in God's willingness to accommodate to our ordinary human condition, and this is seen pre-eminently in the incarnation.[13]

Rather than setting the Bible and the tradition's subsequent history into opposition to each another, Brown he argues that, a developing tradition needs, "to be seen as the motor that kept both engines running." This allows "the potential to respond effectively to changing social conditions." Revelatory insights are "by no means to be confined to the canonical dispensation, but instead God must be seen as continuing to speak equally across the subsequent two millennia."[14]

Brown does not intend to suggest inevitable progress, for church and Bible have both at times been in error. The Biblical accounts offer effective critique of more recent church and social failures, but Brown does not deal with this, "because it is already a well-worn theme in the writings of numerous theologians." Rather, he focusses on, "the ability of the developing tradition to modify and sometimes even 'correct' its biblical roots."[15] "Because Christianity lays claim to an historical revelation," Brown says, "the temptation is to suppose that only what is firmly grounded in its historical past could be relevant or true. While it remains important to identify what the original perspectives were, trajectories have been opened up which have the inherent power to turn back upon the tradition from which they come and force a new reading of its implications."[16] Brown insists that "while Scripture is entitled to the first word, it is not necessarily to be given the last."[17] He is acutely aware that "That kind of

11. David Brown and Sarah Miller. "An Interview with David Brown: Art, Culture, and the Human Christian Experience." Musings from the Mountain [blog]. 2014. URL: http://musings.sewanee.edu/post/story/an-interview-with-david-brown-art-culture-and-the-human-Christian-experience. Accessed 28 Dec 2015.
12. Brown, "Response," 268.
13. *Ibid.*," 269.
14. Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 1.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.,* 1-2.
17. *Ibid.,* 2.

verdict does, of course, raise acute questions about authority and truth."[18] He gives some sixty pages of *Discipleship and Imagination* to a discussion of types of truth and how truth can be said to attach to the non-historical or fictional.[19] Rather than finding division to be a matter of "inevitable condemnation," Brown argues that conflict is "integral to the growth of the community's self-understanding."[20] Heresy is necessary to the growth of orthodoxy. We seek a common mind, but there is danger in supposing any issue to be completely resolved or closed. This may make religious truth provisional but no more so, Brown thinks, than scientific or historical truth. "It is the imagination," he says, "that best preserves the continuing tradition's grasp on divine reality and our subjective appropriation of it in our own discipleship."[21]

Brown seeks a theological method that corresponds to God's excessive presence throughout creation. As Gavin Hopps put it, "there is a 'homological' relationship . . . between the self-giving generosity of God and the generosity involved in Brown's discovery of its presence."[22] Brown's investigations of classical music, architecture, drama, painting, and dance are themselves theologically grounded in a doctrine of God, and more specifically in his Christology. This method involves a critique of dogmatism, by which Brown means a prejudicial assumption "that all the answers lie within one's own faith."[23] Revelation is not unique to scripture; the Bible offers a "much more profound picture of divine reality and its purpose for humanity and creation," but is not itself the totality of revelation.[24] We must take seriously the possibility of encountering Christ in these other media.

Christian tradition has seen itself to be a reflection of an original and unchanging divine discourse. Brown says this fails to account for the ways in which "all human expression is embodied within, and limited by, particular cultural contexts."[25] For Brown, tradition is never static and not a "mere inheritance of the past."[26] Our history shows that "even tradition itself needs first to be undermined before it can acquire a capacity for further development."[27] Similarly, the scriptures themselves give us permission to undermine them in the name of

18. *Ibid*, 2-3.
19. *Ibid.,* 342-406.
20. *Ibid.*, 3.
21. *Ibid.*, 3.
22. Gavin Hopps, "Infinite Hospitality and and the Redemption of Kitsch," in MacSwain and Worley, *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture*, 162.
23. Brown, "Response," 278.
24. *Ibid*.
25. Brown, "Response," 267.
26. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 30.
27. *Ibid.,* 51.

fidelity to the tradition. They are part of a developing tradition and imaginatively reappropriate material from the past to address questions of the present.[28] Brown argues that the access to the divine that this implies has been the norm through human history rather than the exception, it being believed that God was available to be experienced everywhere.[29]

Because the scriptures do not address every possible social situation, it seems reasonable to expect that when a tradition encounters new social conditions it might generate new insights and then incorporate them back into the tradition.[30] Brown suggests that such social triggers are themselves part of the revelatory process and evidence that the text itself cannot be understood as the exclusive generator of meaning. Rather than thinking about the Bible as the "already fully painted canvas and the traditions of the later Church as offering at most some optional extra colouring, we need to think of a continuous dynamic of tradition operating both within the Bible and beyond."[31]

Brown's commitment to a dynamic, unfolding tradition is immediately related to his understanding of and commitment to the reality of the incarnation.[32] We suppose that sane people do not consider themselves divine.[33] Therefore, at least initially, Jesus of Nazareth would not have understood himself to be the divine Son of God.[34] The corresponding Christology requires that the incarnation be understood as "a real kenosis."[35] There is thus a high degree of "accommodation to the human condition in the incarnation."[36] If the incarnation can be understood as the greatest point of God's involvement with humanity, then it follows that "God submitted perception of himself to the vagaries of a developing tradition; so why not elsewhere also?"[37] That scripture is not a fixed text but a manifestation of a living and moving tradition and revelation is culturally enmeshed, fallibly mediated, and progressively grasped is, for Brown, a natural outworking of the implications of the incarnation.

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28. E.g., the Gospel of John's treatment of Pentecost (Brown Tradition and Imagination, 60*ff.*), the different treatments of Jesus' birth story (Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 76*ff.*), and the development of the Abraham narrative (Brown *Tradition and Imagination*, 227*ff.*).
29. Brown, "Response," 266.
30. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 71.
31. *Ibid.,* 365.
32. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 101.
33. *Ibid.,* 278. Recall, however, C. S. Lewis's famous apologetic: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not [simply] be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (London: Collins Fontana, 1955), 52-3.
34. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, 320.
35. *Ibid.,* 299.
36. *Ibid.*, 276.
37. *Ibid.*, 275.

The incarnation reveals a God who took with maximum seriousness the limitations of a specific cultural context, and so we only do that revelation a disservice if we posit as always present in Scripture the viewpoints now taken by the contemporary Church. Instead we need to hear how the story develops, and thus of a God continuously involved in the history of the community of faith.[38]

Brown's understanding of the incarnation has been strongly critiqued by some who may otherwise be appreciative of his work. For example, Kathryn Tanner states that Brown's "belief that the incarnation endorses human creativity—more strongly, that here God has abandoned Godself to a tradition of interpretation—seems wildly lopsided and quite inadequate soteriologically."

Partly this stems from seeing the incarnation exclusively terms of revelation. Something must be communicated to us so that we can understand it, appreciate its significance, and be drawn into it. Brown's stress is therefore all on divine accommodation and on how incarnation in a fully human person is the means God uses to attract and engage us. Lost is the soteriological importance of conversion, transfiguration, new creation, rebirth, or deification — indeed the way of the cross and resurrection— the sense that we are in dire straits and radically transformable by God's grace.[39]

I have quoted Tanner's review at length because as MacSwain notes, it has become a much-cited "touchstone for those critical of Brown's general approach,"[40] but I think she "doth protest too much." I would respond that it is precisely Brown's intention to encourage a soteriological understanding of God's grace through the imaginative revelation of God in accessible human culture.

I am sympathetic to Brown's view that the self-revelation of God continues today and persuaded by Bouchard that, "insofar as *love* is crucial in Christianity, revelation must be 'ongoing', if indeed incarnate divine love is ongoing."[41] The question, then, is not whether God continues to reveal Godself but rather, what form or forms does that revelation take and how, and by what criteria, may it be discerned. Of course there are a host of subsequent questions which it would be tedious to reiterate here. Among the most pressing, given Brown's views, is whether to privilege certain revelatory phenomena, especially the scriptures. Is ongoing enscripturation possible?

The application of Popper's falsifiability principle has become conventional practice in the evaluation of scientific theory. In 1955 Anthony Flew (1923-2010) famously raised the question of its application to theology, declaring that claims about God were merely vacuous

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38. *Ibid.*, 1.
39. Kathryn Tanner, [Review of Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*], *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 1 (2001): 121.
40. MacSwain, "Introduction," 7, note 19.
41. *Ibid.*

where they could not be tested for truth or falsehood.[42] This in turn stimulated the concept of a 'religion without propositions' developed among others by D.Z. Phillips, R.B. Braithwaite, Paul van Buren, Don Cupitt, and T.R. Miles. I wonder whether the process of imagination bringing revelation into being and changing the tradition—as proposed by David Brown— may in some way be extended beyond the arts into wider fields of human endeavour.

Returning to Clive Marsh's comments on Brown's work and pneumatology, noted above:

> Perhaps we need to turn to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to see how that helps Christian theology in its critical and appreciative engagement with culture in all its forms. … Attention to the Holy Spirit's work in the world would prove a basis for that common grace, and the manifestation of what there is of God already in the whole of humanity, which needs to be highlighted and worked with in the public sphere by cultural commentators, including theologians. With Vanhoozer, then, I want to suggest that pneumatology is the key doctrine in a theology for cultural engagement. In this, I differ somewhat from Brown's strong emphasis on the sacramental.[43]

Stanley J. Grenz (1950-2005) was committed to contextual and culturally-sensitive theological method and construction, employing culture as a source of theology in his theological method, along with scripture and tradition. Grenz saw culture as one of the media through which the Holy Spirit is present and speaks. This perspective in Grenz's theology has been criticised, however, for want of stable criteria with which to discern the voice of the Spirit in the midst of other voices transmitted through culture in culture.[44]

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42. Anthony Flew, R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell. "Theology and Falsification: The *University* Discussion," in Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (SCM Press, 1955). *See also:* Anthony Flew, "Theology and Falsification: A Golden Jubilee Celebration," *Philosophy Now* (October / November 2000): 28-9.

43. Marsh, "What if David Brown had Owned a Television?" in MacSwain, *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture,* 194-5, quoting Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 42.

44. Fandy Handoko Tanujaya, "Culture as the Voice of the Spirit? An Assessment of the Pneumatological Understanding of Culture and its Use in Stanley J. Grenz's theological method," Th. M. diss., Trinity International University, 2015.

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